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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was conducted to determine the influence of mentors on the career development of Illinois community college presidents, and the extent to which those presidents were now mentoring others. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 community college presidents in the state to gather information on mentoring characteristics and impact; the mentoring cycle; and the presidents' current role as mentors. Study findings included the following: (1) mentors performed four major functions; i.e., modeling, facilitating, teaching, and encouraging; (2) a mentoring cycle, involving stages of initiation, duration, and termination, was present in most mentoring relationships; (3) the respondents no longer had mentors when they became community college presidents, though once a president retired or was fired, he/she was open to the development of additional mentoring relationships; (4) all presidents felt they learned many of the components of a successful presidency from their mentors; and (5) all respondents indicated that they were involved in mentoring young, talented proteges, with many consciously participating in mentoring women. (EJV)

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MENTORING IN THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

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MENTORING IN THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to determine the influence of mentors on the career development of Illinois community college presidents, and the extent those presidents were now mentoring others. Using a constant comparative method of data analysis, the material obtained through 20 in-depth personal interviews was analyzed.

Data collected through these interviews led to findings conceptualized into four categories: mentoring characteristics, mentoring cycle, mentoring impact, and an analysis of presidents as mentors.

Several of the findings are congruent with the previous research on mentoring, while the presence of an inanimate mentor, the uniqueness of the first mentor, and positive learning through negative mentors, in addition to the post-presidency findings, emerged as new insights obtained from this study.

From these findings, seven conclusions were drawn about the importance and nature of mentoring with regard to career development. Implications and recommendations were made which related to adult career development theory, higher education, and adult education.

MENTORING IN THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

The purpose of this study was to add to the available information on mentoring and its relationship to career development. In particular, this investigator explored the impact mentoring had on the career development of Illinois community college presidents. Another part of this study was to determine the extent and nature of mentoring that all of these presidents had engaged in during their careers.

Twenty Illinois community college presidents drawn through a stratified random sampling process were interviewed in depth as to the part mentoring had played in their lives. Tapes of these interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative method of data analysis. In addition, an interview log was prepared from the tapes and observation sheets which documented the key points that arose during the interview. The interview log, or data analysis sheet, was coded in two ways. First, each tape was listened to and a log of each important comment was written down on a sheet of paper. These comments were coded to identify the president interviewed as well as the comment's position on the tape. This allowed the researcher to go back to any tape at a later time and locate a particular piece of data. From this analysis, categories descriptive of the phenomenon were inductively derived. These four categories are: mentoring characteristics, mentoring cycle, mentor impact, and presidents as mentors.

Although the term mentor was defined in this study as a person, and mentoring as a person-centered activity, some of these presidents revealed that inanimate referents such as dissertation topics, institutions, and books had served as their mentors. One person in expressing this type of mentor said: "I do a lot of reading, and I would call books and the people who write them my mentors. I look at a book as a person putting down his best thoughts." Another referring to his alma mater said, "Stanford as a school has become my mentor. Just having it on my application opened a lot of doors for me." Within both animate and inanimate mentoring, the nature of the relationship varied according to the degree of involvement present between the president and the mentor.

Animate mentoring relationships are characterized by the sex and age of the mentor. Only one president reported having had a female mentor in his career. This woman was dean at the time the subject was a department chair. All other mentors in this study were men. The age of the mentors varied a great deal, with some being of the same or close in age, and some being much older. Most mentors, however, were at least 15 years older than the mentee. One president had a mentor three years younger than himself, while at the other end of the continuum one mentor was 35 years older than the protege.

The involvement with inanimate mentors was generally less intense than the relationships established with people. For the most part, the presidents felt a sense of awe, respect, and indebtedness to these inanimate mentors. One president stated: "I pick up a biography of a great administrator and for 20 hours he becomes my mentor and I learn from him." One unusual inanimate mentoring relationship developed between a president and his dissertation topic.

Thus, with regard to types of mentoring, this study found that mentors could be either persons or things. When the mentoring was between people, a range of emotional involvement was found to occur. Inanimate mentoring, on the other hand, though not less influential, was much less emotionally intense.

Functions of Mentors

This study found that mentors performed four major functions: modeling, facilitating, teaching, and encouraging. Modeling was discussed by one president when he said: "He was a direct influence on my career, led by example, no high pressure. He was thoughtful of people and strong enough to keep things moving when they had to be moving."

Other functions required that the mentor take a more active role in the development of the mentoring experience. Those who performed as facilitators opened doors, recommended for potential jobs, and became the direct advocate of the future president mentee. One, in illustrating the pushing that the mentor had done for him, stated: "He called people and told them I could walk on water and they treated me like a king. I would not have had my first presidency if it hadn't been for him."

Mentors also used teaching on a frequent basis with their mentees. In the work environment the opportunity for teaching was used whenever the situation arose. One president in highlighting this activity said: "Whenever something important would happen, he would say, 'Okay, for your staff development lesson today, let's see how you would handle this problem. You will probably be a president some day and I'd like you to remember this.'"

Other mentors served mainly through encouraging the young mentee and by providing him experiences that tested and stretched his abilities. One president in describing this kind of mentoring situation said, "He encouraged me to try things, and didn't stomp on me when I tripped and fell. If I did fall, he always picked me up and got me going again." Another in describing a similar mentor said: "He was always getting me to believe in myself, to do better, to want to be perfect. He was constantly giving me different projects to do and thus expanding my talents."

Mentoring Cycle

The data from this study revealed that a mentoring cycle does indeed exist. This cycle will be discussed within the stages present in most mentoring relationships. These stages of initiation, duration, and termination were discussed by most of the participants. In addition to these three sequential stages, a fourth period was discovered as occurring within the mentoring life of each president. This phenomenon has been described for this study as the post-presidency period. The presence of this period occurs in the mentoring process when the president first assumes the top leadership role.

Mentoring relationships were initiated in one of two ways: a mentor either selected an up-and-coming mentee, or a protege selected an older, trusted person to be his mentor. Those participating in this study overwhelmingly indicated that they had been selected by the mentor. One

individual illustrated the best of both worlds by asserting, "I want my staff to develop a sensitivity for informal mentoring opportunities. This would be much more effective than creating formal arrangements. I would set up triggers which would then be called a formal informal program."

After relationships were initiated, either formally or informally, there was not a common thread that characterized the length of time or duration of each mentoring event. However, the majority of the presidents indicated that most of their mentors were still important people in their lives. This was especially true of the presidents' first mentors who most had continued close relatipnships with, even though many were now separated from those individuals geographically.

The majority of the relationships, however, tended to become an occasional call or letter-type activity with a great deal of fondness displayed by both. This type of maintenance was alluded to by a number of presidents. One said: "He's still a Christmas Card mentor." Most of the mentor relationships, when finally terminated, did so in a slow, gradual manner.

The men of this study, for the most part, no longer had mentors when they became community college presidents. This post-presidency part of the cycle is apparently the point in the presidents' lives when the circle has been completed and is fully joined. One president in discussing why he felt this occurred stated: "Presidents no longer have mentors because they have reached a milestone. They have not actively started thinking differently and still may even look for individuals to assist them. However," he added, "it's as far as they can go at this particular point in their lives at this institution. People now look to them as the mentor--the circle has closed." Another president in making a similar point said: "When you are the president, people treat you differently and expect you to be presidential, and you can't be as open and honest--you are now supposed to mentor."

It was discovered, however, that once a president retired or was fired he would once again be open to the development of additional mentoring relationships. One such event was described by a president who would soon leave his job. "Now that I'm leaving here I'm sure I'll once again have mentors. I can even begin to feel these mentoring relationships develop."

Mentoring Impact

All presidents felt that they learned many of the tangible components necessary to be a successful president from their mentors. Most gained this knowledge in a positive direct way by either being taught how to do certain things, or through discussions with their mentor as to how a particular issue should be handled. However, the respondents also indicated that they had learned how they wanted to operate by watching mentors who provided positive examples in some areas, but in others taught them what <u>not</u> to do.

These learned skills ranged from developing an understanding of the importance of the financial health of the institution to how many ramifications a decision might have on the political posture of the college. One president stated: "I learned the art of politics, the political part of

being an administrator from him. He was a master at working with people both inside and outside the institution. He taught me political savvy."

These presidents repeatedly noted that their operating style came from mentors. Furthermore, most also felt that the informal structure that was their operating philosophy was also obtained in this way. In describing this intangible form of impact, one stated: "My mentors gave me my vision. This broad view of the future I found stimulating and exciting." Another said: "He was much more creative than I, and he gave me the inspiration and the ability to look and plan ahead. He was a real futurist."

There were those who had mentors that were primarily negative. One in describing an individual that fit into this category stated: "He was an extremely negative mentor and never kept anyone informed. I was not privy to any of the essential information, and to this day I am the exact opposite in my operating style."

In summary, mentoring is viewed by almost all presidents as the mechanism used to create the framework to function in the role of president. There are many tangible traits that these presidents credited to a significant individual serving as their mentor. These ranged from the guidelines each had developed to operate their institutions, to the importance an understanding of the politics of decision making had on their ability to stay alive as presidents. Most also described the more intangible aspects like the impact the mentoring relationships had on the development of their philosophy, self-esteem, and vision. In addition, these study participants learned from mentors who had a primarily positive impact on their lives to those whose main impact had been negative.

Presidents as Mentors

All of the study participants implied that they were following in the footsteps of their mentors. Since all indicated activity in the mentoring arena, the factors that affect those relationships were investigated. This profile of a young, talented protege differs from the presidents' previous mentoring relationships in one important aspect: a majority of the study presidents indicated they were involved in mentoring women. Since few of the presidents had discussed women mentors, this change was described by some as a shift in societal acceptance of the role women now play within academe. One president offered: "It used to be a negative thing to have a female mentee. Now I do everything I can to assist the women on my staff who have the potential and want to move ahead." Another said: "I found a young lady that I felt was presidential material and I've consciously attempted to mentor her."

Most of the presidents were designing mentoring activities similar to those that had been used with them years earlier. Some of these presidents offered, in addition to encouragement, advice concerning potential job choices, philosophical discussions, purposeful movement within the institution, and even suggested an appropriate administrative style.

The study presidents were very active in carrying on the mentoring tradition, and felt strongly as a group that doing this was one of the key responsibilities of their presidencies. They felt that it was their job to give back what had been given to them by selecting bright, poised, energetic,

and ambitious young potential leaders to prepare to take over the reins they would soon pass on. Thus, the mentoring concept comes full circle, from the initiation of a relationship years earlier by a previous generation's caring mentor, to the mentee of that era now mentoring others. As one president summarized:

> I wish I could tie a piece of rope to my finger at the beginning of each day, and after a day of work look at the piece of rope to remind me and make me think, did I miss a shot to assist someone today? Could I have done more to give, to prepare the next generation to take over when I leave? Could I have been a more successful mentor?

Study Conclusions

In analyzing the data obtained from the personal interviews, seven distinct conclusions were identified. Some of these conclusions agree with the literature on mentoring, while others cover topics that have not previously been addressed. The conclusions are: a) mentoring is a crucial component in the career development of community college presidents, b) mentoring takes many forms, c) functions rather than form define mentoring, d) proximity is a necessary factor for the development of mentoring relationships, e) mentoring can occur through negative as well as positive modeling behavior, f) the cessation of formal mentoring coincides with the assumption of the presidency, and g) current presidents are consciously mentoring others.

Community colleges and other institutions of higher education need visionary leadership that includes an understanding and awareness of the adult student. Career preparation, retraining, or change are programmatic priorities at many institutions of higher education. At the community college in particular, where the average age is over 30 years old, adult career development is an important focus for faculty and staff to embrace. Thus, the implications this study's findings have for higher education extend beyond the training of top-level administrators. Raising the awareness of the importance of mentoring in career development should be a concern of those involved in the delivery of career preparation programs as well.

Turning to the implications for adult education, a field which has long been concerned with growth and development of individuals, it is important that adult educators understand the impact mentoring can have on personal and career development. All of the study participants emphasized the importance of mentoring and it is recommended that more attention be paid to this factor in the career preparation of adult educators themselves. In addition, adult educators have the responsibility of discussing this factor and of serving as examples to their adult students. These adult educators can serve as role models and mentors in program areas like Adult Basic Education and General Educational Development. Furthermore, programs for foreign-born adults would be enhanced by teachers who are not only teachers, but role models and mentors as well. These participants have the need for mentors to help them adjust to their new environment.

Finally, adult educators who are found in a multitude of settings and institutions where career movement and career change form the basis for academic, managerial, and technical training, need to be cognizant of

mentoring's impact on the lives of successful adults. Programs or workshops designed to maximize the potential usefulness of mentors to career development could be part of the total programmatic response to ever-changing career patterns so characteristic of today's society.

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